The Facts about... High Blood Pressure
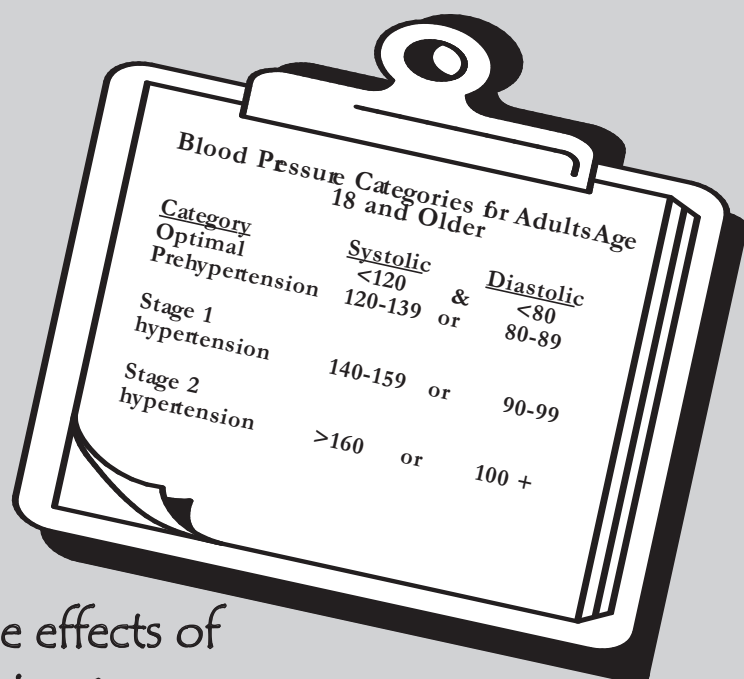
Frequently Asked Questions:

What is blood pressure?

Blood pressure is the force of the blood pushing against the walls of the arteries. Your blood pressure is highest when the heart contracts (while it is pumping blood). This is called systolic pressure. When the heart is at rest (between beats) your blood pressure is lower. This is called diastolic pressure. Blood pressure is always given in these two numbers, using millimeters of mercury as the method of measurement. systollic and diastolic pressure are equally important. The systolic measurement is on top, and the diastolic is on the bottom (e.g 120/80 mmHg.).

What is high blood pressure or hypertension?

Blood pressure changes during the day. It's lowest when you sleep and rises when you get up. Many things such as excitement or activity can cause your blood pressure to rise. But most of the time it stays about the same or within a range. If your blood pressure rises and stays above the recommended levels, you may have high blood pressure

Blood Pressure Categories for Adults Age 18 and Older

Category	Systolic		Diastolic
Optimal	<120	&	<80
Prehypertension	120-139	or	80-89
Stage 1 hypertension	140-159	or	90-99
Stage 2 hypertension	>160	or	100 +

What are the effects of high blood pressure?

High blood pressure causes the heart to work harder, putting you at increased risk for stroke, heart attack and kidney problems. Regardless of race, age, or gender, anyone can develop high blood pressure. It is estimated that one in every four American adults has high blood pressure. Once high blood pressure develops, it usually lasts a lifetime. You can prevent and control high blood pressure by taking action. (see back)

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What causes high blood pressure?

The causes of high blood pressure vary. Causes may include narrowing of the arteries, a greater than normal volume of blood, or the heart beating faster or more forcefully than it should. Any of these conditions will cause increased pressure against the artery walls. High blood pressure might also be caused by another medical problem. Most of the time, the cause is not known. Although high blood pressure usually cannot be cured, in most cases it can be prevented and controlled. You cannot tell if you have high blood pressure, because there are no symptoms. The only way to find out is to get it measured by a health professional.

Who can develop high blood pressure?

High blood pressure is common. About 65 million American adults — nearly one in three — have high blood pressure. It is very common in African Americans, who may get it earlier in life and more often than whites. Many Americans tend to develop high blood pressure as they get older, but this is not a part of healthy aging. Middle-aged Americans face a 90% chance of developing high blood pressure during their lives. Others at risk for developing high blood pressure are the overweight, those with a family history of high blood pressure, and those with prehypertension (120–139/80–89 mmHg).

What are risks factors that I can't control?

Family History - The tendency to develop high blood pressure runs in families.

Increasing Age - The older you are the greater your chance of developing high blood pressure.

Race - African Americans are more likely to develop high blood pressure than caucasians.

Diabetes - People with diabetes are at greater risk for developing high blood pressure.

Gender - High blood pressure is usually more common in males, until the age of about 50.

What should I do before having my blood pressure taken?
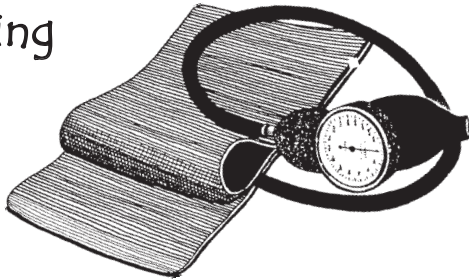
* Avoid eating or drinking anything other than water 30 minutes before the test
* Empty your bladder before the test
* Inform the health professional of all medications you are taking
* Before the test sit for five minutes with your feet flat on the floor
* Have your arm supported at heart level, on a firm surface, during the test
* Know your blood pressure cuff size
* Request two or more readings and average the results
* If your blood pressure is high, find out when you can return for follow-up
* Keep a record of your blood pressure reading

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What can I do to help to control my blood pressure?

1. **Be physically active** - Physical activity helps lower high blood pressure. Any activity, if done at least 30 minutes over the course of a day, for most days of the week, helps. "Aerobic" activity is best for conditioning your heart and lungs. Examples include brisk walking, swimming, bicycling and running. This type of activity should be done for at least 30 minutes, three to four times a week.

2. **Maintain a healthy weigh**t - Losing extra pounds is very important in reducing high blood pressure. Losing as few as 10 pounds can reduce blood pressure in many overweight people. It also enhances the blood pressure lowering effect of medication and helps reduce other risk factors associated with heart disease such as diabetes.

3. **Choose foods low in sodium** - Some people can reduce their blood pressure by cutting back on sodium or salt. Sodium occurs naturally in foods. It is also added to food during processing, cooking, or at the table. Avoid canned or processed foods.

4. **Limit alcohol** - Drinking too much can raise blood pressure. Too much means more than two drinks of beer, wine or liquor per day.

5. **Follow the DASH Diet** or Dietary Approaches to Stop Hypertension - Studies show people with high blood pressure who follow the DASH Diet show a reduction in blood pressure. DASH focuses on increasing servings of fruits, vegetables and lowfat dairy products, while decreasing sodium and saturated fat. DASH is rich in magnesium (such as nuts,soybeans, seafood, whole grains), potassium (such as, avocado, sweet potatoes, spinach, oranges, bananas) and calcium (such as yogurt, milk, cheese, and almonds), as well as protein and fiber.
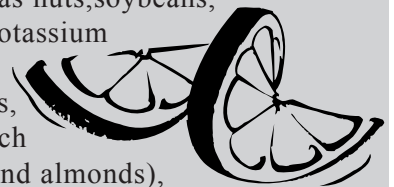
DASH eating plan based on a 1600 calories daily:
* Vegetables 3-4 servings
* Fruits 4 servings
* Whole grains and grain products - 6 servings
* Lowfat or fat free dairy foods - 2-3 servings
* Meats, poultry, and fish - 1-2 servings
* Nuts, seeds, and dry beans - 3 per week
* Fats and oils - 2 servings
* Sweets 2 servings per week

Websites for DASH information:
www.nhlbi.nih.gov/health/public/heart/hbp/dash/ or
www.hearthighway.org